

The experience of the laity in the work of Ecumenism

AZEEM SHERAZ BHATTI*

In his exhortation *Ecclesia in Asia* John Paul II strongly stressed how the ecumenical commitment represents an important respect of our witnessing as Christians in Asia. He said: “the division among Christians is seen as a counter-witness to Jesus Christ by many in Asia who are searching for harmony and unity through their own religions and cultures. Therefore the Catholic Church in Asia feels especially impelled to work for unity with other Christians, realizing that the search for full communion demands from everyone charity, discernment, courage and hope”¹.

Actually Christian presence in our continent, despite being a minority, is characterized by an extreme variety: aside to the Catholic Church there are many evangelical churches. Moreover has to be mentioned also the presence of ancient oriental churches, mainly in India and in Central Asia. More recently new assemblies inspired by Pentecostal movements are spreading at an impressive speed. This multiplicity, however, as John Paul the 2nd had already remarked, is not harmonized, but it shows a dramatic fragmentation that is too much, as the pope said, a counter-witness. It’s a matter of fact that division of Christians has been sanctioned into the legislation of many Asiatic Countries – among those there are India, Indonesia, China, Japan, and others; there, Catholicism and Protestantism are considered two different religions!

Ethnic or territorial distribution of different confessions, which is the result of the missionaries’ work, reinforced fragmentation, and the habit to live apart one from the other, often ignoring each other.

Yet today, in Asia, facing the enormous challenges of this continent, which represents a frontier of the communication of the Gospel in the new millennium, the prayer of Jesus is still echoing: “May they all be one” (*Jn 17,21*). That last prayer urges us to commit in order to reach unity. It is a matter of faith, but also a question which arises from History.

* Director of Catholic Hospital in the Diocese of Islamabad Rawalpinid, Pakistan; Member of Community of Sant’Egidio

¹ JOHN PAUL II, Apostolic exhortation *Ecclesia in Asia*, n. 30.

In fact, where the followers of the Gospel are still a minority, facing difficulties and even open persecutions, it's more evident how division is a crop of evil; division weakens our communities, division makes the witnessing of our faith inefficient.

Recently a great work has been indeed made in order to get different Christian confessions and traditions closer. I am referring to the intense work of the Commissions of our Episcopal Conferences. I'd especially like to mention the commission set by the Episcopal Conference of Pakistan, which has also worked a lot for the inter-religious dialogue.

Many opportunities to meet and to exchange our experiences took place in the past years. We have to recognize, at this level, the efforts of some evangelical organization, such as the Christian Conference of Asia, based in Hong Kong, and other agencies. Moreover, some congresses, and ecumenical gatherings have taken places, forging a new concept of fraternity between Christians. Let me just quote the recent meeting in Dhaca (Bangladesh), whose inspiring title was "To revitalize the ecumenical movement in Asia"². The participants tried to detect the "new paradigms of the ecumenical commitment". I'd like to focus our attention on that issue: I am convinced that we, as catholic lay-people, joined in movements and new communities, may represent an important support for the action of the Church in our Countries especially at this level. The charismas that gave birth to many of the movements of the Catholic Church in the 20th century, have focused on unity, like the Focolare movement of Chiara Lubich, the catholic Charismatic Renewal, the Community of Sant'Egidio, which has ecumenism and dialogue among its spiritual roots. The impressive diffusion of the Taizé prayer groups in Asian countries is also a test of the need of ecumenical exchange among the laity, especially the youth.

That's why, despite of the "crisis of ecumenism" which is usually claimed, we can affirm that the lay movements, for their specific character, can play – and are palying - a role of support to local Churches in order to promote mutual understanding, cooperation and even spiritual unity with our brothers of other Christian confessions. inspired by the words of Pope John the 23rd, who used to state: "Let us look for what unites us and put aside what divides us".

² The CCA General Committee, the members of the WCC Central Committee from Asia, the NCC General Secretaries and the Asia Regional Group met at a Joint Consultation in the Hope Centre, Dhaka, Bangladesh, from the 31st of August to the 3rd of September 2008.

Two main fields represent the floor of this ecumenical encounter: the Word of God and Charity.

WORD OF GOD AND SPIRITUAL ECUMENISM

The teachings of the Second Vatican Council has given new strength to the centrality of the Word of God in the life of Catholic movements and new communities. Actually knowing more, prioritizing, focusing on the Word of God in the personal prayer as well as in the prayer of the community is an essential basis of the “spiritual ecumenism” already invoked by the Second Vatican Council.

On this regard, many initiatives have been implemented in recent years. Improving the knowledge of the Holy Scriptures, promoting occasions of study and discussion, may represent an important floor for ecumenical understanding. The Hong Kong Bible Society, for instance, promotes a new ecumenical cooperation in order to spread the knowledge of the Holy Scripture. The Community of Sant’Egidio, as well, promotes a “Bible Day”, once a year in every diocese of its presence, to celebrate the centrality of the Holy Scripture³, encouraging people to have their own personal copy of the Holy Bible, and to discover that really the Word of God is “a lamp to our feet and a light on our path” (*Ps* 119, 105).

CHARITY AND ECUMENISM OF PRACTICE

The second common ground of unity is charity. Love without reward for the poor, the marginalized, the needy one, but also for brothers and sisters in faith who face difficulties, obstacles, even persecution, enables Christians to communicate the Gospel even in environments where an explicit evangelical announcement should be not tolerated, like in the great countries where the majority is muslim, or where political situation makes obstacles. It is what can be identified as an “ecumenism of practice”.

Today’s Asia is not just the cradle of the great religions. It is also the privileged place of the new religion of materialism, with its own temples – the shopping malls, which

³ Cf. SECOND VATICAN ECUMENICAL COUNCIL, Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation *Dei Verbum*, no. 8.

became like huge modern cathedrals where to perform the rite of buying. The new religion of materialism already has also its own victims: a huge crowd of poor people. Let me just recall the slave children forced to labor. There are 155 millions of slave children in Asia, according to the International Labor Organization; a large number of them are in India and Pakistan⁴.

The increasing number of poor people are a side effect of the globalization of economy. As lay people who establish their spiritual life on the Word of God, we are urged to face these challenges. We shall answer with a new globalization of the Holy Spirit, that is love and compassion.

Charity unites us. We are living in a season when we often hear about the difficulties of the ecumenical dialogue. But we can give our contribution to the unity of Christians, promoting unity through charity. As a matter of fact we Christian of different confessions are already united in exercising charity. The experience of the Community of Sant'Egidio confirms so in Asia as well as in the rest of the world: Christians who belongs to different confessions join together in taking care of the poor and neglected ones.

On another side, we cannot deny the great difficulties that Asian Catholics and Christians as a whole face today in many Asian countries, due to religious or political background. Some sad episodes happened in recent years, such as the aggression to Christians in Gojra, Pakistan, about one year ago, or what is going on since months in Bekasi, Indonesia, where an evangelical community is banned to use its place of worship by a fundamentalist Muslim group, show the need of develop deep ties of fraternity and cooperation, to support our brothers and sisters in distress. Even if we are minorities, we should not fear. We are called to be a “creative minority”, as Pope Benedict the 16th said, adding that a creative minorities are those who can change history. Minorities who find the way of ecumenical relationships, in prayer, in common actions of charity, can change the history of our continent, can make us better witnesses of Christ. That is why the ecumenical dialogue and cooperation, in praying together as well as acting jointly, is so crucial. On the contrary division makes us weaker in front of evil, makes us defeated.

⁴ Cf. ILO, *Accelerating action against child labour*. Report of the Director-General, International Labour Conference, 99th session, 2010.

Let me tell you an experience that I have personally experienced and that makes my faith in these words of the Pope stronger and stronger.

Since some years ago the Community of Sant'Egidio in Pakistan regularly visits the inmates in the death rows. Sometimes they are Christians who are in jail because of the Blasphemy Law or because they are victims of abuses and false allegations.

Among those Christians there was a young protestant who has been unjustly accused of a murder by a landlord who had tried to abuse his mother. As the boy had tried to defend his own mother from the harassment, the landlord had taken revenge accusing him of a murder happened in the region and asked the capital punishment for him. We, catholics and protestants together, we prayed for him and we decided to act. We tried to convince several witnesses to be heard by the court and to state the truth. It was not an easy path. At the beginning we were insulted, verbally abused, sometimes even menaced. That action required time, patience, capacity of persuasion. But we weren't hopeless or complaining, we just keep on for some years. The situation was desperate. But finally a muslim lawyer, hit by our perseverance, decided to join our cause. We managed to convince 50 witnesses, catholics and protestants, to go in front of the judge and to win the fear of that landlord. When the judge read the cancellation of the death penalty all of us, including the witnesses, began to sing a Psalm in the hall. It was extremely unusual: Christians singing a prayer in a court of an Islamic Country!

You see, my dear brothers and sister, we, disciples of Christ in Pakistan, are really a weak minority, but praying and cooperating, in unity, we found the strength of defeating a great evil, to save the life of a Christian accused by a muslim landlord.

That's why, at the end of my contribution, I'd like to tell that we shall dare and dream more. A very famous protestant missionary and theologian, Albert Schweitzer, who spent his life for the poorest ones in Africa, suggested that every Christian should experience a "heroic note"⁵ in his life.

We can't afford to be weak and conformist Christians, bound to division and irrelevance. We have to find an "heroic note" in our witness of Christ. The martyrs show us the way, not just the early ones, but the many witnesses of faith, who belong to any Christian confession and lived during the 20th and 21st century. In the Jubilee of year 2000,

⁵ Cf. A. SCHWEITZER, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, Adam and Charles Black, London 1910.

Pope John Paul the 2nd organized a special ecumenical vigil of prayer in their honor, stating that “Christ’s witnessing up the shedding of blood speaks louder than the divisions of the past”.⁶

Recently, a few weeks ago, the whole world was struck by the murder of 10 Christians, medical doctors, volunteer of the «International Assistance Mission», a christian NGO dedicated to the people of Afghanistan. They were killed for their faith, and their evangelical dedication to the poor, the sick, the needy. “We are here to help people”. This was their answer to those who had warned them. They witness that there are still people who feel life as a mission, as Andrea Riccardi said, in a public commemoration. They are our brothers and sisters, they are an example. This is the ecumenism of martyrdom. This is the way for us to walk.

In 2008, Pope Benedict, visiting the memorial of the witnesses of faith, in the Basilica of the Apostle Bartholomew in Rome, where the Community of Sant’Egidio collected the memories of Christians of different confessions who gave their life for the Gospel, said: “May the example of the martyrs whom we have recalled guide your footsteps so that you may be true friends of God and authentic friends of humanity. And do not fear the difficulties and suffering that this missionary action entails: they are included in the "logic" of the courageous witness of Christian love”.⁷ I’d like to share these words of the Pope with you all, because I am convinced that, while they properly describe our experience as lay people engaged into the service to ecumenism, they also show us the path, to be true friends of God and authentic friends of mankind.

⁶ Cf. Ecumenical Commemoration of the witnesses to the Faith in the Twentieth Century, 7 May 2000.

⁷ BENEDICT XVI, Address at the conclusion of the Liturgy of the Word, memory of the witnesses to the Faith who died during the 20th Century, Basilica of St Bartholomew on Tiber Island, Rome, Monday, 7 April 2008